

The scent of antiseptic and ink, incense, a familiar comfort, clung to the air. Jazz notes, low and smooth, wove through the distant hum of the ventilation system. I sat hunched over the computer, my fingers flying across the keyboard, each click a tiny prayer. None of my morning guests had arrived yet, and Hong, my silver-haired apprentice, was still a phantom. My screen glowed, a portal to countless job boards. I kept sending emails, a relentless digital assault, hoping to snag something better for Est. Part-time photography wouldn't pay his bills, not really. And I wanted to help him, truly. I couldn't lock myself away in this studio forever, not when I saw the potential he still held, a potential I'd once shared. It felt like a betrayal, a shame, to let my own lens gather dust.

I closed my eyes, a long sigh escaping my lips. Est's current portfolio, a digital ghost, mocked me from the cloud. Almost empty. The photographs from his latest gig? He couldn't use the photographs from his latest work, Useless. Another dead end. It didn't help. Not at all.

A deep breath filled my lungs, carrying with it the faint memory of cheap ramen and late-night study sessions. The past shimmered, a sepia-toned film reel. I saw a younger Est, a younger me. Est, even then, seemed a beginner at everything, despite being older by a year. He arrived at the student residence with just a single, battered suitcase and a worn-out camera, its lens scratched, its body dented. I watched from the doorway, my fingers still sticky from peeling a tangerine. I remember thinking, "He's alone too." Like me, his family didn't come to say goodbye. Different reasons, perhaps, but the loneliness felt the same. We were alone, after all. Not the romantic kind of alone. The practical kind. The kind where no family comes to wave goodbye because the trip costs money, because someone is angry, because someone is gone, because someone doesn't believe in you, because the reasons pile up until they become a wall you stop trying to climb.

That day, I'd shared some of the things my family had mailed from the village—dried fruits, a hand-knitted scarf, a packet of my mom's special tea, Things my family had mailed from the village because they couldn't come in person but still wanted to send proof of love. Est took them, his fingers brushing mine, a small, grateful smile blooming on his face. From that day on, I followed him, a quiet shadow, through lecture halls and darkrooms, sharing classes, sharing meals. Everything felt easier then, buoyed by the support of our scholarships. I took thousands of photos back then, each click a desperate hope, a belief that an image could change something. But the one who changed wasn't the world; it was me, the day I bought my first set of stick-and-poke tools.

He photographed campus rallies and empty streets after rain. He photographed the dorm hallway at night, the light turning everyone's shadows long and lonely. He photographed hands—hands passing coins at the cafeteria, hands writing notes,

hands gripping bus handles. He told himself he was collecting evidence, building a body of work that would change something: a system, a perception, a future. Sometimes he photographed Est without asking. Est reading. Est fixing the camera strap with thread. Est laughing once, rare and sudden, when the dorm auntie scolded them for tracking mud inside. Est sleeping at a library table with his cheek on his forearm, looking younger than he ever did awake.

I thought that photos would be what would transform me: into an artist, into someone visible. But the one who changed me wasn't the camera.

It was the day he bought a cheap traditional tattoo kit, the kind sold at market stalls without reliable instructions. He told himself it was just curiosity. Something to do with his hands when his head wouldn't stop spinning. Something small he could control. That night he sat on his bed with the kit laid out like stolen tools. Needle. Ink. Alcohol wipes. His heart beat too hard for something so simple.

Est watched from the other bed, chin resting on his knees. "What is that?"

"Tattoos." I said, trying to sound casual. His voice gave him away.

Est leaned forward. "On people?"

"On skin."

Est's eyes widened a little. "You can do that?"

"I can try."

Est watched him clean, silently, absorbing every movement. Then Est smiled, with the same cautious smile as on the first day, and said. "If you become good, you should make me one."

I laughed. "I won't touch you until I'm sure I won't ruin you."

Est's gaze fell on the fresh ink on Tui's skin. "I don't think you ruin people." he said quietly, as if it were something he had been holding back.

Photography had made him observe the world. Tattooing made him enter it.

A sharp sound from the doorbell shattered the quiet, snapping me from the reverie. Hong, his silver hair a bright beacon, entered, a wide, happy grin splitting his face, a bouquet of flowers clutched in his hand.

"Look what I found on the way." he said, his voice light, almost a hum, as he extended the blossoms toward me. They were bright, cheerful things, a riot of orange and yellow.

"They're not your usual anthuriums." he added, his eye crinkling at the corner, a knowing wink. "But he sends his best regards."

I just sighed, a soft huff of air, and offered a small smile. My computer, with a cheerful sound, interrupted us. Another email.

"So, what's the damage today?" Hong asked, already setting the flowers on the counter. He moved with a quiet efficiency, grabbing a clean vase from under the sink. "New client? Old friend asking for a cover-up?"

I shook my head, my gaze still fixed on the screen. "Neither. Just another rejection for Est. Or another 'we'll keep your resume on file' email."

Hong paused, his hands stilling over the vase. "Still at it, huh? You're going to single-handedly solve the unemployment crisis for photographers, aren't you?"

"Someone has to." I tapped my fingers on the desk, the rhythm uneven. "He's got talent, Hong. Real talent. More than I ever did with a camera, honestly. It's just...he needs a break. A real one."

"He has you." Hong's voice was gentle, a quiet truth. He filled the vase with water, the sound a soft gurgle. "That's a pretty good break, if you ask me. You gave him a place to land, a job, a home."

"A part-time job that barely covers rent and a couch to crash on sometimes isn't exactly a golden ticket." My voice held a sharp edge, born of frustration. "He needs stability. He needs to feel like he's building something."

"And you're trying to build it for him." Hong plucked a wilting leaf from one of the flower stems. "But Tui, you can't carry his whole career on your back. He has to want it, too."

"He does want it." I turned from the computer, my eyes meeting his. "You saw how he was after that dream. After getting fired. He's just... fragile right now. He needs a win. Something big enough to remind him why he started."

"That dream of his." Hong carefully arranged the flowers, their petals bright against the studio's muted tones. "It really shook him, didn't it? I've never seen him so quiet, so... hollow."

"It always does." I leaned back in my chair, the plastic creaking. "It's like he relives it every time. The metallic taste, the shouting... it's real to him. And then the shame of losing his job on top of it all. It's a lot."

"So, you're playing guardian angel." Hong glanced at me, a soft smile playing on his lips. "Again. You know, you do that a lot. For everyone."

"Someone has to." I mumbled, a faint blush creeping up my neck. "And besides,

he's family. We stuck together through university. He's the closest thing to a brother I've got in this city."

"I know." Hong finished with the flowers, placing the vase on the small table near the reception area. The bright colors injected a sudden cheer into the space. "And he's lucky to have you. Most people don't get a Tui in their corner."

"What about you?" I asked, a playful challenge in my voice. "Am I in your corner?"

Hong laughed, a soft, melodic sound. "You know you are. You're the one who gave me a chance, let me start tattooing here, even when my lines were wobbly and my shading was... experimental."

"Your lines aren't wobbly anymore." I countered, a genuine smile replacing the earlier frown. "And your shading is incredible. You're going to be huge, Hong. Your art is unique."

"Thanks to you." He shrugged, a hint of shyness in his posture. "You always see the best in people. Even when they don't see it themselves." He walked over to the coffee machine, the rich aroma of fresh grounds beginning to fill the air. "So, back to the flowers. Did you guess who sent them?"

"Oh, I know exactly who sent them." I rolled my eyes playfully. "The same person who sends them last Tuesday, hoping I'll magically develop a love for daisies instead of anthuriums."

"He's nothing if not persistent." Hong poured water into the machine. "And quite charming, don't you think? For a flower boy."

"He's a kid, Hong." I sighed, running a hand through my brown hair. "A sweet, charming, flower-obsessed kid. And way too young for me." but I longed for his smile.

"Too young for you?" Hong chuckled, the sound bubbling like the coffee. "You're twenty-three. He's... what, twenty? That's hardly a chasm, Tui."

"It feels like one." I picked at a loose thread on my jeans. "He's still at university. Still figuring things out. I've already... done all that. I've already made my mistakes."

"Everyone makes mistakes, Tui." Hong brought me a mug of coffee, steaming and fragrant. "And sometimes, the best way to learn from them is to make new ones. With someone new."

"Easy for you to say." I took a long sip, the warmth spreading through me. "You're all mysterious and reserved. You don't get your heart stomped on like an old rug."

"Perhaps not in the same way." Hong leaned against the counter, his expression

thoughtful. “But I’ve had my share of... disappointments. Everyone does. It’s part of life. You can’t just wall yourself off because of one bad experience.”

“It wasn’t just one bad experience, Hong.” My voice dropped, a shadow falling over my features. “It was... a mess. And I don’t want to drag anyone else into that. Especially not someone as bright and hopeful as Lego.”

“Lego.” Hong repeated the name, a small smile playing on his lips. “So, you do think about him, then. You just called him bright and hopeful.”

“Of course I think about him.” I threw my hands up in exasperation. “He brings me flowers! He leaves little notes with quotes about art and nature! He’s... he’s impossible to ignore.” His hair, his bright eyes—everything about him was hard to ignore.

“And you don’t want to ignore him, do you?” Hong’s gaze was perceptive, seeing past my defenses. “There’s a reason you keep those flowers, Tui. You put them in water, each time. You don’t just toss them.”

“They’re pretty.” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks flush again. “And they smell nice. It’s good for the studio’s ambiance.”

“Sure.” Hong’s smile widened. “Ambiance. And the way your eyes light up when he walks in? Is that for ambiance too?”

“My eyes do not light up.” I protested, though I knew it was a losing battle. “I’m just... polite. He’s a customer, in a way.”

“A customer who brings you gifts every week, hoping to win your affection.” Hong pushed off the counter, moving towards his own workstation. “You know, he talks about you, too. To me. He asks about your day, about your art. He thinks you’re incredible.”

“He doesn’t know me.” I said, a bitterness I hadn’t intended creeping into my voice. “Not really. He sees the tattoo artist, the owner of Ink & Ashes. He doesn’t see...the rest.”

“And you won’t let him.” Hong picked up a new sketchbook, flipping through its blank pages. “You’re so quick to write people off, Tui. To protect yourself. But sometimes, protecting yourself means missing out on something wonderful.”

“I’m just being realistic.” I took another gulp of coffee, the heat a welcome distraction. “I’ve got enough on my plate. Est, the studio, making sure everything runs smoothly. I don’t have time for complications.”

“Lego wouldn’t be a complication.” Hong’s voice was soft, persuasive. “He’d be...a breath of fresh air. A different kind of flower.”

"Oh, now you're speaking in metaphors." I rolled my eyes again, but a tiny smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. "Very poetic, Hong. Did you read that in one of your art books?"

Hong just shrugged, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Maybe. Or maybe I just observe. You know, like an artist. Seeing the colors, the patterns, the connections." He paused, then added, "And I see a connection between you and Lego. A very bright one."

"You're impossible." I shook my head, but the anger had drained away, replaced by a familiar warmth. Hong always managed to do that, to cut through my defenses with his quiet observations. He had a way of seeing things, of articulating unspoken truths, that was both unsettling and comforting.

"And you're avoiding the obvious." Hong walked over to his tattooing station, pulling on a fresh pair of gloves. "But that's okay. I'll keep bringing you his messages. Maybe one day, you'll listen."

"I listen." I insisted. "I just...I process. Slowly."

"Sure you do." He grinned, then gestured to the computer. "So, that email. Was it good news for Est, or more of the usual?"

I turned back to the screen, my expression sour.

"The usual. 'Thank you for your interest, but we've decided to move forward with other candidates.' Blah, blah, blah." I slammed my hand lightly on the desk. "It's infuriating. He's so much better than 'other candidates.' He's got an eye, a soul for it. He captures emotions, not just images."

"They don't see it." Hong started setting up his machines, the low hum beginning to fill the studio. "But you do. And that's what matters. You keep pushing for him."

"I will." My jaw tightened. "I'm not giving up. Not on Est, not on this. He deserves to have his work seen, to have his voice heard through his art."

"And what about your voice, Tui?" Hong asked, his gaze direct. "When do you pick up a camera again, just for you? Not for the studio, not for Est, but for yourself?"

The question hung in the air, heavy and unexpected. I hadn't thought about it, not really, in years. My own photography, the passion that had once consumed me, felt like a distant echo. The thousands of photos I'd taken in university, the ones I hoped would change something... they were locked away in digital archives, unseen, unshared.

"I don't know." I admitted, the words feeling foreign on my tongue. "There's just... no time. The studio, the clients, everything else."

“Make time.” Hong’s voice was firm, a rare direct command from him. “You preach about passion to Est, but you neglect your own. That’s not sustainable, Tui. You’ll burn out.”

“I’m fine.” I said, a little too quickly. “I love tattooing. It’s my art now. It’s what changed me.”

“It is.” Hong nodded. “And it’s beautiful. But it’s not the only art you have inside you. Don’t forget that. Don’t forget the person who bought that first set of stick-and-poke tools because he was bursting with creativity, not because he was trying to escape something.”

His words hit home, a quiet truth that resonated deep within me. I had bought those tools not as an escape, but as an expansion. A new way to express the wild, creative energy that had always coursed through me. But somewhere along the way, the photography had faded, replaced by the demands of the studio, the responsibilities. And now, the responsibility for Est.

“You’re right.” I conceded, the admission tasting a little bitter, a little sweet. “I...I should. Maybe. Sometime.”

“Not sometime. Soon.” Hong’s voice softened. “You inspire people, Tui. You inspire me. Don’t lose that spark. Don’t let it dim.”

I looked at the bright bouquet on the counter, then back at the email on my screen. Rejection. Again. But then, I thought of Est, of his quiet determination, of the way his eyes lit up when he talked about a perfect shot. And I thought of Lego, of his persistent, hopeful gestures.

“Okay.” I said, a new resolve hardening my voice. “Okay. First, I’m going to find Est a job. A good one. And then...then maybe I’ll dig out my old camera. See what happens.”

Hong smiled, a genuine, unreserved smile that rarely broke through his reserved demeanor. “That’s the Tui I know. The one who doesn’t give up. On anyone. Even himself.” He picked up a stencil, its intricate design already drawn. “Now, I have a client arriving in twenty minutes. Think you can handle the reception for a bit?”

“Always.” I pushed back from the computer, a fresh wave of energy coursing through me. The jazz music swelled, a vibrant backdrop to the renewed hope blooming in my chest. The scent of ink, of coffee, of the fresh flowers from Lego, filled the air. It was a good scent. A hopeful scent. And maybe, just maybe, Hong was right. Maybe it was time to let a little more of that hope into my own life, too. Starting with Est. And maybe, just maybe, a little bit for me.

I just sighed and smiled, and then the cheerful sound of my computer interrupted us: a new email.